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ABSTRACT

All Extension professionals employed by the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service during the entire Fiscal Year 1971, a total of 378 employees, participated in a study to determine their attitudes toward working with low-income clientele. Data were collected by mail questionnaire, personnel records, and statistical reports from the employees. Of the questionnaires, 355 usable ones were returned. The major dependent variable was an attitude score calculated for each participant by assigning values to answers to eight questions relating to various aspects of low-income work. Results of the data analysis show: (1) that most of the personnel had a generally positive attitude toward low-income work, with older employees having higher attitude scores; (2) employees who spent most time with low-income audiences had higher attitude scores; also administrators and rural development agents had significantly more positive attitudes toward low-income work; (3) the employees felt that their first audience priority was rural communities; low-income farmers were rated second, followed by commercial farmers; (4) nearly all felt that specialized training was needed; (5) a small majority felt that each Extension worker should have responsibility for low-income work; (6) there was general agreement that such work will increase during the next five years; (7) generally, home economics subjects were listed as most important; and (8) the employees felt strongly that educational programs were the most effective strategy for assisting low-income audiences. (DB)

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FACTORS CONCERNED WITH COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK WITH LOW-INCOME CLIENTELE IN LOUISIANA

by

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A summary of an Ed.D. dissertation in Extension Education prepared under the supervision of Dr. J. H. Jones, Jr., Louisiana State University, December, 1971.

A copy of the complete dissertation is on file in the main Library at Louisiana State University.

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Purpose of the Study

The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service has traditionally been involved with low-income audiences. Recent years have seen an emphasis in this type of work. It was the purpose of this study to gain a better understanding of Extension's present role and how its staff was relating to low-income work so that competencies in this area could be improved.

This was a descriptive study concerning factors associated with Extension employees' attitudes about work with low-income clientele. Data were collected by mail questionnaire, personnel records, and statistical reports from the employees.

Selection of Participants

The study included all Extension professionals employed by the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service during the entire fiscal year, 1971. Those whose service was interrupted for any reason and new employees hired during this period were not included. The purpose of this requirement was to obtain data only from those who had a full year of reporting into the LEMIS system in order that meaningful comparisons could be made between employees on the basis of time spent working with low-income clientele, number of low-income contacts, and percent of total contacts that were low-income. A total of 378 employees qualified for inclusion in the study. There were 355 usable questionnaires completed and returned. The major dependent variable was an attitude score calculated for each participant by assigning values to answers to eight questions relating to various aspects of low-income work.

Conclusions

It was observed that most of the Extension personnel who participated in the study had a generally positive attitude toward more work with low-income audiences. The fact that older employees and those with more years of service had higher attitude scores could be attributed to these older employees being more anxious to accept administrative decisions. It could also be the result of these older employees being in higher positions and in closer communication with Extension's administration. Emphasis should be placed on increased communications and involvement of new and younger employees with low-income programs. This situation could also be illustrated by the higher attitude scores of state office staff compared to those working in the field. Significantly higher attitude scores were recorded for Negro employees indicating their considerable enthusiasm and concern for work with low-income clientele.

The fact that employees who spent the most time with low-income audiences have higher attitude scores implies the possibility that increased involvement among Extension's staff might improve the attitudes of those who are reluctant to work with these people. This concept was further reinforced by data indicating that administrators and rural development agents had signficantly more positive attitudes toward low-income work. Both of these employee groups were generally committed to work with

low-income clientele.

The data show that the respondents felt their first audience priority was rural communities. It was significant to note that low-income farmers were rated second, followed by commercial farmers. From this priority, it could be concluded that Extension's professional staff feels a strong obligation toward this segment of the farm population.

Nearly all of the respondents felt that specialized training was needed for them to work more effectively with low-income audiences. It was interesting to note that those who felt the need for such training was most necessary also had the most positive attitudes toward low-income work.

The study revealed that a small majority of respondents felt that each Extension worker should have responsibility for low-income work rather than having certain agents working exclusively with these people.

There is also general agreement that emphasis on work with low-income clientele will increase during the next five years.

Findings in the study relative to perceived importance of various subject areas could have considerable value for future program emphasis. Generally, home economics subjects were listed as most important with a significant exception being home vegetable gardens. Other subject areas worthy of considerable emphasis for low-income audiences included family living, money

management, nutrition, clothing, housing, home safety, consumer competence, horiticultural crops, and farm management.

Careful planning is required in the preparation of educational materials for low-income audiences. Special consideration concerning the usefulness and relevance of the subject-matter is necessary if the program is to be successful.

The respondents generally felt that the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service was more successful in its work with low-income audiences than the other agencies and programs mentioned. The food stamp program was listed as second most effective. Possibly the reason for the relatively high rating for these two programs was the respondents' greater familiarity with them. There was a tendency to rate programs or agencies higher that tried to offer the low-income citizen opportunities to improve himself through education rather than welfare-type programs.

The respondents felt strongly that educational programs were the most effective strategy for assisting low-income audiences. Since Cooperative Extension was created to implement such programs, it is not surprising that its employees are committed to that philosophy. Changing the surroundings by such means as offering better jobs, control of inflation, and providing low-cost housing also received considerable support as a strategy.

Giving money through welfare, unemployment compensation, pensions, and similar programs was considered completely ineffective by about half the employees.

Most of the participants felt that Louisiana Cooperative Extension's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program had been fairly effective and that some of the experience gained from the program could be applied to other areas of Extension work. The use of non-professional aides was an example. The use of a supervisory aide and additional secretarial help was advocated by most of the respondents in programs where large numbers of aides were employed. Those employees who spent the largest percentage of their total time working with the nutrition program had higher attitude scores, indicating a more positive attitude toward additional work with low-income audiences.

Nearly half the respondents felt that the nutrition program had an adverse effect on other Extension programs. There is no doubt that an activity as ambitious as the nutrition program required changing existing priorities and spending less time with some of Extension's more traditional responsibilities. It was interesting to note, however, that nearly a third of those who participated in the nutrition program felt that involvement had been responsible for a slight increase in the effectiveness of other on-going Extension programs.

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